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# Eric Overmyer's on the Verge a Production Focusing on Feminine Values

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ERIC OVERMYER'S ON THE VERGE  
A PRODUCTION FOCUSING ON FEMININE VALUES

by  
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A Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty  
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This Thesis submitted by Beth Stadem-Carlson in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done, and is hereby approved.

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Permission

Title Eric Overmyer's On the Verge: A Production

Focusing on Feminine Values

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## ABSTRACT

Eric Overmyer's play On the Verge focuses on three women who leave their world in the year 1888 and enter Terra Incognita, a fanciful world that propels them into the future until they land in the year 1955. The women in Overmyer's play are three extraordinary explorer/adventurers whom, I believe, are based upon three women explorers who actually lived in the late 1800s. The thrust of my thesis focuses on identifying the values displayed by the women in the play, and their real-life counterparts, and determining whether or not these values can be identified as being "feminine" or, if indeed, there is such a distinction when focusing on values.

Chapter I states the purpose for the thesis and includes some descriptions and qualifications for the terms feminine, masculine, effeminate, womanly, manly, and value. In Chapter II, the play is looked at structurally and a brief history of the real-life Victorian women is given. Chapter III discusses the overall concept of the play and Chapter IV examines the production process. Chapter V acknowledges the actors and evaluates the success of the directorial concept. The conclusions drawn are based, in part, on the material

discussed in the chapters, and, in part, on external evaluation and criticism found in Appendix B. Appendix A contains a number of photos of the production and Appendix B contains outside evaluations from three sources.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study will focus on the values of the three characters found in Eric Overmyer's On the Verge. The characters' names are Mary, Alexandra, and Fanny. These characters are based, at least in part, on three extraordinary women travelers/explorers, Mary Kingsley, Alexandra David-Neel, and Fanny Bullock-Workman, all of whom lived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Much of the dialogue in Overmyer's play consists of direct quotes from books written by and about these women, documenting their travels and experiences. While doing research on their lives, I found myself fascinated by their courage, strength, and determination to accomplish their goals, despite the fact that they were living in a Victorian era, a time when a woman's role was more rigidly defined than it is today. This belief and the concept of the characters in On the Verge traveling through time, led me to contemplate the idea that a woman's values are not necessarily determined by the period in which she lives.



For the purpose of the study on feminine values, feminine will be defined as characteristic of women: delicate, sensitive, having no manly characteristics, i.e., effeminate; while masculine is described as being unwomanly or pertaining to men or boys.

Effeminate is described as having qualities associated with women, and not befitting a man such as lack of force, softness, weakness, not being dynamic or vigorous. Womanly is only described as having the becoming qualities of a woman, while manly is described as acting as a man "should be," i.e., strong, frank, brave, noble, independent, honorable, behaviors that are "suitable" for a man, i.e., masculine.

Value is described as anything of worth, merit, or importance, or that which renders anything useful or important such as social values, the ideals, customs, or institutions of a society. These values may be positive or negative.

These descriptions, taken from the American Heritage Dictionary, emphasize the theory that women are instinctively pacifists and men are instinctively aggressive. Jill Dolan addresses this theory in her book entitled The Feminist Spectator as Critic.

Because they can give birth, women are viewed as instinctually more natural, more closely related to life cycles mirrored in nature,

which they denigrate rapaciously. Since women are nurturers they are seen as instinctively pacifistic. Men, on the other hand, are viewed as instinctively violent and aggressive. Women are spiritual; men have lost touch with their spirit in their all-encompassing drive to conquer and claim.

Sex is biological, based in genital differences between males and females. Gender, on the other hand, is a fashioning of maleness and femaleness into the cultural categories of masculinity and femininity. These adjectives describe cultural attributes that determine social roles. (Dolan 42)

The women in the play and the real life women from whom some of their characteristics are drawn, all display feminine qualities and their values reflect this. The characters also display traits described by the word manly, i.e., masculine. I contend that a feminine person (i.e., a woman) can have values and characteristics that would be considered manly by definition, such as independence, strength, courage, and honor. I would argue that these character traits need not diminish the femininity of the woman or her values.

In the following chapters I will look at the play structurally and give some history of the real life women

explorers and their relevance to this production.

Chapters III and IV will focus upon the concept for the play and the process involved in its production, while keeping the thrust of the focus on the values of the women characters in the play.

In my evaluation of the production, I will analyze the success of the directorial concept and use the external criticism given to help draw my conclusions.

## CHAPTER II

### ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY

In analyzing the play using Aristotle's six elements of drama, i.e., plot, character, theme, dialogue, spectacle, and mood found in his Poetics (based on the translation by Henry Butcher), Overmyer's On the Verge can be broken down in the following manner.

Overmyer's plot centers on three experienced women/explorers, who have chosen to travel together rather than alone in their search for Terra Incognita. This fanciful, imaginary land called Terra Incognita literally means "an unknown land." The two acts are broken down into several scenes, each of which has its own title. As the ladies travel, they find themselves encountering strange people and articles that give them clues to the fact that they have entered some type of time warp and are traveling away from eighteen eighty-eight and toward the future. Each scene adds a new twist to the plot as the women continue to encounter strange and wonderful characters and clues which motivate them to continue their trek into Terra Incognita.

There are three distinct and contrasting characters in the play. Mary Baltimore, the oldest and most

scientific of the three women, is analytical, disciplined, and practical. She serves as a mediator between the proper and somewhat stuffy Fanny and the youthful and impetuous Alexandra.

Fanny Cranberry is well-traveled and, like her companions, has had various articles published in reputable journals of her age. Fanny is far more concerned with propriety than either of her sister sojourners. For example, she insists upon "dressing" for tea when they entertain the cannibal from Alsace-Lorraine. She is vain about her looks and enjoys compliments. Fanny feels it is her duty to continually correct Alexandra, who is always overstepping the bounds of propriety.

Alexandra Cafuffle is the youngest member of the trio. She is puppy-like in her enthusiasm and has an unquenchable thirst for adventure. She has a love affair with word combinations and wants to "Kodak" everything she sees.

Mr. Coffee, et al., is a combination of characters encountered by the women/travelers while they are traveling through Terra Incognita. In the encounter with Mr. Coffee, et al., we observe the contrast in personalities of the women in their reactions to him. He is also important in furthering the plot by giving the women clues to what lies ahead.

The theme of this production is reality vs. fantasy, hope, courage, and imagination. In the opening of the play the ladies are leaving their "real" world and are entering Terra Incognita, an "unreal" world where anything can happen. It takes a great deal of courage for the women to continue their adventurous journey into an unknown land, and at times they must encourage each other so that they don't lose hope. Each of the women carries a journal in which they record their thoughts and experiences. These are shared with the audience at certain points in the play and reveal insight into the individual characters' personalities.

Dialogue is a key element in Overmyer's play, evidenced by its extreme and unique use of language. There are many pieces of dialogue using words that are seldom used in our everyday speech. Examples of this can be found throughout the play:

Act I Scene (1) On the Verge:

Alex: Isthmus or archipelago?

Mary: Before I began my travels in the uncharted reaches of the world an avuncular colleague took me aside. 'I have heard your peregrinations are impelled, in part, by scientific curiosity,' he said (Overmyer 1, 2).

Act II Scene (20) Later That Same Evening:

Mary: You should have seen the ecdysiastical floor show.

Fanny: Mary, spare us your salacious anthropological details.

Mary: Remarkably supple. A cornucopia of concupiscence (Overmyer 63).

The language used by Overmyer required the actors portraying the characters to be very articulate and proper in their pronunciations, which was fitting for the well-bred, turn-of-the century women whom the actors were portraying.

Overmyer's play required that special attention be paid to the visual aspects as well. The women characters wore costumes that represented the era in which they were living before they entered Terra Incognita. Each scene, or section, had its own special requirements. In one scene the women were traveling through a jeweled jungle, an effect that was produced with light and sound. In another scene the ladies were in their tents writing in their journals around the evening campfires. This effect required tent-like structures to be flown in and light and sound effects be produced to enhance the idea that it was evening. Many scenes required the use of set pieces that could be rolled on and off or that could be flown in and out. Overmyer had a title for each scene or section so as one scene ended and another began, a voice,

accompanied by music and/or sound effects, would introduce the new sections. The combination of light, sound/music, and visual effects reinforced the message, or statement of ideas that Overmyer had written for each scene.

### Historical Background

The three women on whom I believe Overmyer's characters are based, were born within a few years of each other; Fanny Bullock-Workman, born in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1859; Mary Kingsley, born in Islington, England in 1862; and Alexandra David-Neel, born in the Parisian suburb of Saint Maude in 1868. Each woman grew up with unique families and acquaintances who perhaps were influential in their choosing to lead such unconventional lives.

Fanny Bullock-Workman was the foremost American woman explorer of the nineteenth century. Born in 1859 in Worcester, Massachusetts, she was the daughter of Alexander Hamilton Bullock, once governor of Massachusetts, and Elvira Hazard Bullock. She was educated in private schools in New York, Dresden, and Paris. After her studies she returned to Worcester and married William Hunter Workman, a prominent physician. (Hamalian 210)

The Workmans lived in Germany for nine years, from where they took trips to several Mid-Eastern countries.



They later traveled on bicycle through India, Ceylong, Java, Sumatra, and Co-Chin-China. In 1898, Mrs. Workman made her first ascent of the Himalayas. In 1906 she achieved the world mountaineering record for women. Numerous times she was the first woman to climb a mountain, many of the peaks towering more than twenty thousand feet. Fanny also explored glaciers and mapped previously unsurveyed territory.

Fanny Bullock-Workman spoke several different languages and lectured in both America and Europe, and was honored by ten European geographical societies with their highest awards. She collaborated on many books with her husband but perhaps the most interesting and insightful book was written by Fanny Workman alone. It is titled Through Town and Jungle (1904) and is based on a trip the couple took bicycling through the south of India. Fanny Bullock-Workman died in Cannes in 1925.

Overmyer's character Mary is very likely based on an extraordinary English woman explorer named Mary Kingsley. Kingsley's love of travel and exploration led her to the depths of Africa, where she studied the cultures and also did research on and collected West African fish.

Mary Kingsley was born in Islington in 1862.

The love of travel and writing were ingrained from her childhood at Highgate. An omnivorous reader, she apparently created a world of her

own amid books of travel, natural history, science, and literature. Both of her uncles were novelists, one the great Charles Kingsley. Her father, an eccentric physician, travelled widely in Asia, the South Seas, and America. In 1892, her parents died, leaving her a modest inheritance that enabled her to travel on her own. On a trip to the Canary Islands, she met the representatives of the West African trading firms who were to influence her views and to stimulate her to visit "the dark continent."

(Hamalian 229)

Through her uncle, Charles Kingsley, Mary was introduced to scientists who helped her realize that she could make a valuable contribution to research by collecting West African fish. Her collection of fish pleased the British Museum so much that she was financed by them for subsequent trips. On one such trip Mary Kingsley not only collected many unknown specimens of fish but also studied a cannibal tribe known as the Fan. Her account of this was titled Travels in West Africa, published in 1897. It was an immediate success and is still widely read today.

Mary Kingsley's narrative style reminds us forcefully that her family bred novelists. No one can come away from Travels in West Africa without feeling that it must be one of the most

fascinating accounts of African exploration ever written. Its many beautiful passages evoke the nobility and the peril of the African forests, rivers, and mountains. Interwoven with these passages are scenes of great humor that gently satirize the blundering visitor rather than ridicule the behavior of the natives as many such accounts so often did. (Hamalian 230)

Mary Kingsley died in 1900 in South Africa while serving as a nurse in the Boer War.

In Overmyer's play, Alexandra, better known as Alex, is constantly referring to her travels in the Far East and Buddhist practices and rituals that she has observed and taken part in. Her real life counterpart Alexandra David-Neel lived the major part of her life in the Far East seeking to immerse herself in the study of Buddhism.

Alexandra David-Neel was the daughter of Alexandrine Borghmans, a very proper, wealthy woman from a socially prominent family. Her father, Louis David, was a committed socialist and a free mason who was very much in opposition with the monarchy of Louis Philippe. Because of his republican sympathies, he was drawn into the Revolution of 1848. After Napoleon III came to power he and his good friend and

co-revolutionary Victor Hugo, were forced to exile themselves to Belgium. (Middleton 2)

The couple who became Alexandra's parents had very little in common. Louis was a strong Protestant, while Alexandrine was a devout Roman Catholic. Louis made it very clear that he did not want children, while his wife dreamed of being the mother of a son who would become a Catholic Bishop of her beloved church. Finally after thirteen years of marriage, she gave birth to Alexandra, whom she gave to a series of governesses and nurses to raise.

Her father took charge of raising his daughter, instilling in her a love of the outdoors as he took her on all of his hunting excursions. At the age of four she was an avid reader, and was an accomplished pianist by age five. She rejected her parents' religion and was drawn to Buddhism as a young girl. It was this interest that led her to seek out other young people who were ready to sweep away the safe, secure nineteenth-century world into which they had been born.

Alexandra became and remained a devout Buddhist until she died. It was this deep spiritual need that led Alexandra to eventually travel to the Orient, India, and Tibet.

At the age of thirty-six, Alexandra married Philippe Neel, age forty, handsome and well-to-do. Until this

point in her life, Alexandra had been making a name for herself as a singer and a writer. A short time after her marriage to Philippe, her father died. His death left a great void in Alexandra's life and heart. She questioned her marriage and could only give Phillipe the words of love and affection she felt in the form of letters, which were addressed to her dear "Mouchy," as she always called him. Oddly enough, Philippe accepted this arrangement and also continued to finance his wife and her extensive travels for the rest of his life. They saw each other very rarely throughout their married life, but continued a loving correspondence, each professing a never-ending love and fidelity. Shortly before her death at the age of 101, a very close woman friend asked what she thought she had accomplished or learned in her most unusual life.

She replied that in truth she knew nothing at all and was only beginning to learn. There were few who understood the true motivation of Alexandra's travels. Every voyager is concerned with some objective, a reason or at least a pretext given for his travels. One may be a geographer, another a naturalist. Alexandra's motivation was to gather manifestations of human thought, to attempt to penetrate the mystery of the world and ease man's fears of suffering and death. (Middleton 181, 175)

Eric Overmyer does not use On the Verge as a vehicle to bring these three women to life in particular. He says as much in his production notes.

The characters of the play are NOT modeled upon particular individuals though I have raided the historical record for details, flavoring, and anecdote. The spirit of the lady travelers inspired On the Verge, and that spirit is the play's true concern: the quality of yearning, courage, and imagination. (Overmyer 76)

It is obvious, however, that the travels and experiences of these three particular women were Overmyer's primary sources for the women in his play. For instance, the character Alex is often making references to the mysteries of the East and Buddhist practices much like those actually experienced by her namesake Alexandra David-Need. Mary refers to her travels in Africa on many occasions, and talks about her experiences with cannibals. In Mary Kingsley's book Travels In West Africa, she writes about her study of the social organization and religion of a cannibal tribe known as the Fan. I found Mary Kingsley's writing style to be not only informative but also very entertaining. It is not surprising that Overmyer quoted her several times. In his play, Overmyer's character, Mary, recounts some advice given to her by a colleague before she sets off on her travels.

Allow me to offer you some sage counsel. Always take measurements, young lady, and always take them from the adult male. (Overmyer 2)

The original quote from Kingsley's Travels in West Africa (1897) says:

My vigorous and lively conscience also reminds me that the last words a most distinguished and valued scientific friend had said to me before I left home was, "Always take measurements, Miss Kingsley, and always take them from the adult male." (Hamalian 235)

In many instances Overmyer uses references from one woman's life and gives them to a different character. For example, when Fanny is speaking about the menu at the Explorers Club she ends with "We both agreed to eschew the jellied viscera" (Overmyer 13). Viscera, by definition, means the heart, lungs, liver and intestines. In Mary Kingsley's book Travels in West Africa, Mary, like Fanny, refers to viscera with humor.

We put our helm paddles hard at starboard and leave that bank. These hippos always look to me as if they were the first or last creations in the animal world. At present I am undecided whether Nature tried "her prentice hand" on them in her earliest youth, or whether, having got thoroughly tired of making the delicately

beautiful antelopes, corallines, butterflies, and orchids, she just said: "Goodness! I am quite worn out with this finicking work. Here, just put these other viscera into big bags--I can't bother any more." (Hamalian 234)

Another word found in Kingsley's book which is used by Fanny rather than Mary is "surulian." Fanny refers to the mighty surulian as crocodile. The actual reference from Mary Kingsley's book goes as such:

On one occasion, the last, a mighty surulian; as the Daily Telegraph would call him, chose to get his front paws over the stern of my canoe, and endeavoured to improve our acquaintance.

(Hamalian 232)

Alexandra David-Neel spent many winters in the mountains of Tibet where she practiced meditation and yoga, in part, so she could control her body temperature.

Except for an occasional attack of rheumatism, Alexandra's health during this winter was excellent. Even when she practiced the yoga exercise known as "tumo," seated in the snow wrapped only in a thin cotton sheet, she never had the slightest sign of a cold. As a result of her practice of tumo, she was able to sleep with fewer and fewer covers during the night.

(Middleton 103)



Overmyer's character, Alex, makes many references to her travels through Tibet and her knowledge of Buddhism and the Dalai Lama himself. Her first journal entry refers to a state of being similar to the one achieved by Alexandra David-Neel through her practice of tumo.

Alex: I have seen wonders in the Himalayas. Magic. Mystery. In Ladakh, it was a quotioned trick for the lamas to raise their body temperature by mere mental exertion. Sheer dint of will. They would sleep all night in snowbanks. At dawn they would douse themselves in freezing streams. Then, ice blue and on the verge of extinction, they would sit lotus and meditate ferociously. Instantly, steam would sizzle off them in clouds, rising past their furrowed brows. In an hour, their robes would be dry as toast-- and neatly pressed. (Overmyer 6)

Fanny Bullock-Workman and her husband took a bicycle trip through the South of India in the late 1890s but in Overmyer's play, Alex is the bicycle enthusiast.

In section three (Up and Over), Mary, Fanny, and Alex discuss the "wearing of trousers."

Mary: The wearing of trousers--by women--leads inexorably to riding astride a horse. Instead of the modest side saddle.

Fanny: And encourages the use of the bicycle.

Which for women can never be proper.

Alex: I happen to be a wheel "enthusiast," and I have often worn trousers--out of sight of civilized settlement to be sure-- whilst wheeling. (Overmyer 8)

In this reference the women in Overmyer's play were exemplifying one of the debates over dress coming to the forefront of the growing women's movement at the close of the Victorian and beginning of the Edwardian age. In an article written by Sheila Stowell, "The Tyranny of Fashion in Feminist Plays of the Edwardian Age," Stowell addresses the issue of feminine fashion.

United by their desire for a political voice, the feminists of this period (moderates as well as radicals) saw their struggle as fundamentally one of definition, that of wresting from men control of the meaning of "woman." So says a radical platform speaker in Elizabeth Rolin's "Votes For Women," a three-act dramatic tract staged in 1907 as part of Vedrenne-Barker seasons at the Royal Court Theatre: "How do they [men] know what is womanly? It's for women to decide that." (Stowell 51)

Stowell's article was referring to the debate between men and women over what defines a woman. The women

feminists were taking issue with the social norm that it was unwomanly for women to wear trousers, and with the idea that men should be able to dictate to women what attire should be worn to be considered womanly. In the play Alex rebels against the same issues as the women feminists in Stowell's article, while Mary and Fanny have obviously accepted the dress code for women of their era.

It is my belief that Eric Overmyer chose to base his characters on the three real life women discussed in this chapter because of their strong commitment to their goals and ideals. To attain these goals they needed strong values, such as courage, strength, and a sense of propriety (i.e., they were doing what was correct for them). In each case, the women accomplished feats that would be considered not only adventurous, but also, in many cases, dangerous. Mary Kingsley's travels through Africa brought her into a completely foreign world filled with jungle animals and native peoples with whom she had daily encounters. Fanny Bullock-Workman not only climbed mountains, and explored glaciers; she toured the entire south of India on a bicycle. Alexandra David-Neel was raised as a proper French woman, but spent the majority of her life tramping about in the Far East (in pants), in order to nurture her spiritual nature that had so fully embraced Buddhism.

Each of these extraordinary women was raised by different families who would have instilled their own sets of values into their daughters. Also the time period in which they were being raised must have influenced their values. Yet in each case, there was a common value exhibited by the women, and that was the value that they placed on their own need to fulfill their dreams at any cost. It was this highest value that kept them going in the face of loneliness, danger, and extreme deprivation.

### Summary

Overmyer's play On the Verge is a "play on words," so to speak. The women/travelers must try to define, for themselves, the new language of Terra Incognita which can be as delusive and misleading as the language that defines their lives back in eighteen eighty-eight.

It is a play about optimism, intelligence, wit, humor, and choices. The story is full of energy and imagination, and the characters that Overmyer has created become real, believable women as they face the challenges of this new world that they have christened "Terra Incognita."

## CHAPTER III

### DIRECTORIAL CONCEPT

#### REALITY VS. FANTASY, HOPE AND IMAGINATION

In the development of my directorial concept it was important that certain ideas would be clear. First of all, the actors should have a clear understanding of what their character's values were. Second, the actors should accept themselves and relate to each other as "real" women. On the Verge is a fantasy piece where three women explorer/adventurers leave their own world and enter Terra Incognita, a world where past, present and future keep colliding with each other. It was important to the plot that we be able to believe them when they boasted of their earlier experiences in the real world, where they had explored and traveled. It was important, given the "unreality" of the setting and circumstances involved in the play, that the characters not turn into caricatures, but remain "real" women lost in an "unreal" world.

To retain this sense of believability, I asked my actors to attempt to make real connections to the fantasy world that they were entering. For example, in scene four, the characters enter "The Mysterious Interior," an

invisible jeweled jungle, that requires the use of machetes to bushwack the dense undergrowth.

In rehearsing for this scene, I asked the women to take their machetes (dulled, of course), go outside of Burtess Theatre, and whack the bushes so they could actually feel what muscles and movements would be used, then transfer that physical feeling to their imaginary jeweled jungle.

Another example is found in scene eleven, "A Prisoner In a Kaleidoscope." In this scene the women were being swept across a howling ice field. They were supposedly tied together with a rope which eventually broke and sent them twirling to the brink of the ice field. It took many rehearsals to achieve the feeling of being propelled back and forth by a howling wind. As this production took place in the summer, we had to rely on our own memories of bucking a freezing, howling wind. They made the connection after much improvisation with and without an actual rope, and with the added sound effect of a howling wind. In many instances, the actors had to rely upon their affective memories to make their actions believable.

Strict attention was paid to the authenticity of the costumes and props. For example, the traveling clothes and costumes worn at Nicky's Paradise Bar and Grill were correct for the period. During the tea party, real

cream cheese was served. Real fortune cookies were offered by Madame Nhu, and Alexandra carried a real Kodak, which was close to the correct period, as were the lanterns, the egg-beaters, pith helmets, and journals.

It was important to keep the characters in contact with reality in the midst of this fantasy world that they were traveling through in order to strengthen the contrast between fantasy and what they knew as reality.

The many characters encountered by the three women during their journey through time were important in helping to establish the differences in the personalities of the lady travelers. It was made clear from the beginning of the play that all three women valued adventure and possessed the courage and determination to commit themselves to their latest endeavor, but each woman had strong individual character traits, which were especially noticeable when they were reacting to the male characters in the various scenes.

Alexandra was very impressionable and approached new situations with the quality of a child. Mary was more scientific in her attitude, needing to analyze a situation and discover the background and facts surrounding it. Fanny was mainly concerned with propriety and adapted herself to the appropriate behavior in each environment.

An example where these particular character traits are exhibited is in scene six, entitled "High Tea--Or

Many Parts Are Edible." The ladies have invited a strange man, dressed in a German airman's uniform, to tea. He is a native, called Alphonse, who says he is from Alsace-Lorraine. Fanny immediately orders Mary and Alex to set tea while she goes off to don the proper attire for the occasion, which includes a tea gown, wig, and tiara. Mary bombards him with questions until she finds out all of the pertinent information; who he is, where he came from, etc. Alexandra listens, wide-eyed to all that Alphonse says until she hears him mention a dirigible, whereupon Alex shows her enthusiasm for this new addition to her vocabulary.

Alex: What a succulent word! Dirigible, dirigible, dirigible, dirigible, dirigible. Up your old dirigible. Give us your huddled dirigibles yearning to breathe free. Have a dirigible on me, big fella. One mint dirigible to go. (Overmyer 18).

Another example occurs in scene eighteen, "Woody's Esso." In this scene the ladies meet Gus, a fresh-faced teenager who works at the gas station. Each woman's reaction to Gus reinforces her individual character traits.

Gus asks the ladies if they have seen the T.V. show Bachelor Father. Fanny, in her proprietary way, chides Gus. Fanny: "My dear boy, a bachelor father is a paradox. An oxymoron. A contradiction in terms" (Overmyer 52).



However, later she compliments him:

Fanny: Gus, we are so very pleased to meet you. You are the first person we have encountered in our travels with a reasonable accent and an acceptable demeanor. (Overmyer 52)

Alexandra, of course, thinks Gus is terrific with his use of unique slang terms. She is willing to accept anything that Gus says. For example, Gus asks the women if they like the Dodgers or the Yanks in the series. Alex asks him who he likes, to which he replies, "the Dodgers." "Then so do I," says Alex (Overmyer 53).

Mary questions Gus until she finds out more information about the mysterious Dragon Lady whom they had previously met and convinces him to provide them with a map which will lead them to the "verge" of their journey.

By establishing the characters' individual personalities, the actors were better equipped to create three realistic women who just happened to find themselves in an "unreal" world.

### Design Elements

The design for On the Verge was important in giving the effect of traveling through time in a world where fantasy and reality kept colliding. Greg Gillette designed the set and lights, and Kathy Jacobs designed the costumes. The designers and I met in late April of 1990

to discuss the concept for the play. We agreed that the play was about reality, fantasy, hope, courage, imagination and that the characters were based on three extraordinary real-life women explorer/adventurers. The designer had sketched a tentative design using a black background setting with pieces of hanging muslin which could be lighted in ways that would create desired effects. There would be several attached levels covering the upstage area which would also be draped with muslin that could be creatively lit. The downstage area would be left open for unit pieces that would be rolled on or flown in for various scenes. For example, in Act II, scene fourteen, "Fanmail from the Future," a dazzling array of gadgets, boys, and appliances etc. was supposed to appear before the ladies out of thin air. To create this effect, a great number of items was attached to a netlike structure and was flown in at the appropriate moment, fulfilling the desired effect.

In Act II, scene eighteen, "Woody's Esso," a large Esso gasoline pump was rolled in to set the stage for the encounter with Gus, the fresh-faced gas attendant. Soon after, a palanquin carrying Mme. Nhu, the Dragon Lady, appeared on center stage. This set piece was powered by Mme. Nhu her/himself.

In scene nineteen, "Paradise '55," Nicky, the lounge singer, was rolled on stage while playing his piano,

which was centered under his nightclub sign that was being held between two palm trees. As Nicky was being rolled on stage, a nightclub table and chairs was rolling on downstage of him.

We agreed that the set and most set pieces would not be realistic but the properties would be, thus combining the real and fantasy worlds. Sound and lighting effects would be used to create a suspended bridge, a river, campfires, a jeweled jungle, a howling ice field, and a sheer ice cliff. I chose music and sound effects for the enhancement of the numerous scene changes, to be used within the scenes, and to enhance the lighting effects and the action of particular scenes. For example, when the ladies entered the "Mysterious Interior," i.e., jeweled jungle, in scene four of Act I, the lights created a green haze over the entire stage, while the sounds of the jungle echoed in the background. The campfires in scene seven, "Ember Tales," were created with small focused pools of red light accompanied by night sounds, i.e., crickets, owls, etc. The howling ice field and the river effects were created with sound effects and the mimed movements of the actors.

By the time I met with the costume designer again, she had familiarized herself with the play and had provided several sketches for the costume plot. We had discussed keeping the women's costumes realistic and

period, dressing them in Victorian trekking outfits, along with full accessories and pith helmets. The characters encountered by the women in their travels had their own requirements. For example, the native cannibal, who after eating his victims, adopted their accents, mannerisms, and dress, needed to be costumed as a German flyer in the early nineteenth century.

The character Grover, who was Fanny's husband in eighteen eighty-eight, wears the costume of a midwest broker of that period. The baby Yeti, who bombarded the ladies with snowballs, was an unrealistic character so his costume created the effect of a creature with a massive body, sans eyes, but with no other recognizable body parts.

The characters Gus and Nicky Paradise were from nineteen fifty-five but their lifestyles were very different and their costumes reflected this. Gus' costume fit his profession as gas attendant, while the high top tennis shoes and baseball cap gave him the youthful appearance he needed. Nicky's costume effectively embellished his profession as nightclub owner and debonair man about town.

In scene twelve, "Not Quite Robert Lowell," the troll who guarded the suspended bridge spoke like a "hip" fifties biker. His costume consisted of a black leather jacket, jeans, t-shirt, black leather boots and greased back hair.

The combination of design elements worked together to create the desired effect for each scene and helped to convey my directorial concept.

## CHAPTER IV

### DIRECTING THE PLAY

The first meeting with the cast was for the purpose of reading through the script and explaining to them my concept for the play. Reading the script with the cast members revealed the humor and clever use of language that Overmyer had written into his play.

Our next meeting as a cast was for the purpose of literally defining the difficult or unfamiliar words used in the dialogue of the play. Jan Blount, my assistant director, was very thorough in her research, making sure that we had the correct definition and/or origin for each word.

The majority of our rehearsals took place in the lower level of Burtness Theatre, better known as the "Pit." The levels that were to be built for the set were taped off on the floor, giving the actors a sense of the dimension, if not the actual height and upward grading of the levels. The set pieces that could be rolled on for different scenes were easily substituted with tables, chairs, boxes, etc.

In the first rehearsals the actors were asked to feel free to move about the specified stage area as they read

their dialogue. The purpose was to give them the freedom to get used to the space and to start experimenting with their character's relationships with each other. After we had gone through the entire script in this manner, I had them begin again with specific blocking for each scene, utilizing some of the movement that had worked well during the experimentation.

In the development of my directorial concept, it was important for the actors, the three women primarily, to have a clear understanding of what their characters' values were. Early in the rehearsal process, I asked each woman to make a list of character traits and values that she felt her particular character possessed. After sharing these ideas, each actor gave her impressions of how she saw the other women's characters in relation to her own.

The values that the women agreed were most important to their characters included the following:

1. Thirst for knowledge/discovery
2. Open-mindedness
3. Wit/humor
4. Independence/freedom of choice
5. Courage/strength/endurance
6. Reverence for life/sense of awe
7. Compassion
8. Sense of romance/adventure

9. Vanity
10. Sense of propriety/what is proper for them
11. Appreciation for difference
12. Acceptance

Although it was agreed that these were the important values which the characters adhered to, each character's personality reflected her own values somewhat differently. It was agreed that Mary, Alexandra, and Fanny were women of contrasting personalities, even though they may have considered many of the same values important. Fanny's appearance was very important to her, as was her sense of propriety, therefore her value of vanity and what is proper was stronger than the importance put on these same values by Mary and Alex.

Alexandra revealed, through her behavior, that she valued the differences that she found in the characters she met, and accepted them without question. Her personality reflected her value of open-mindedness, wit/humor, and adventure. These values were not as clearly evident in her two companions.

Mary put great value on knowledge and discovery. It was this strong value, along with her value of courage, strength and endurance, that led her to decide to continue her journey into the future.

During the rehearsal process, the actors spent time researching the lives of the women upon whom we believed



these characters were based. We shared the ideas that came from their research, i.e., how some of the direct quotes taken from the women's writing could enhance our production, and how we could assimilate some of the real-life women's characteristics into our characters. By the second week of rehearsal, each actor had a good sense of who her character was and where she fit in the trio of travelers.

Mary was the keeper of the peace. She was the oldest, and most often, wisest of the three. She had the qualities of a scientist, analyzing situations and searching for more information. Mary could be quite strict in her attempts to make Fanny and Alex aware of the importance of continuing their journey yet she could be almost motherly towards them, giving encouragement when the situations became difficult.

Alexandra was the youngest, given to childlike displays of anger or pleasure. She possessed a puppy-like energy, continually making discoveries and behaving impulsively. Alex was a very creative person, and was either capturing a new experience with her Kodak or was trying out new word combinations to express herself. She found great pleasure in shocking the ever-proper Fanny, and Mary's job as mediator was often needed to keep the peace.

Fanny's primary concern was the proper behavior for each situation, and she took it upon herself to admonish Alexandra whenever necessary. Fanny was the vainest of the women and loved receiving compliments, regardless of the source. She was not unlike Alex in her child-like qualities evidenced in her impulsive bursts of temper or delight.

By establishing the contrast in the characters' personalities, they could be portrayed as individual women who shared important values. As mentioned in Chapter III, the travelers' encounters with various and unusual characters gave indications of the differences in the women's personalities. The encounters also established certain values which were important to each of the women. Nowhere was this more evident than when the ladies arrived at Nicky's Peligrosa Paradise Bar and Grill in the year nineteen fifty-five. Nicky was the perfect caricature of a narcissistic lounge singer who had the power to grant any wish or desire that the ladies had. Fanny received her much-desired bubble bath and was showered with all the attention and romance that she ever wanted from Nicky himself. Alexandra found the perfect outlet for her creativity by writing jingles for Burma Shave commercials. She also teamed up with the "hip" troll, the keeper of the bridge, from scene twelve, to write Rock and Roll tunes.

Mary was allowed to partake in and analyze some of the native customs of Nicky's Paradise Bar and Grill, such as gambling in the casino and the "ecdysiastical" floor show. Mary found it all fascinating and enjoyed her time there, but her thirst for new discoveries in the future led her to decide to leave the others behind and continue her travels alone.

In the rehearsal process for the production, the actors continued to make new discoveries about their characters which, in turn, would dictate the directing process. In some scenes a certain side of the character's personality would be revealed allowing the actor to react accordingly. For example in scene twenty, "Later That Same Evening," Mary has discovered the casino at Nicky's Peligrosa complete with "ecdysiastical floor show." In her excitement Mary drops her controlled scientist's persona and does a bawdy imitation of the dancers. In scene five, "Native Chop," Alexandra, who is usually so positive and exuberant, becomes discouraged by the annoyances of life in the jeweled jungle. She loses her physical energy and becomes lethargic and despondent.

When Fanny encounters the handsome and debonair Nicky Paradise, she drops her sharp, disciplined manner of movement and speech and becomes a soft, pliable woman in love. The directorial concept for this production

remained the same as we rehearsed the play, but the directing process remained flexible enough to suit the characters' needs. As the production progressed, I found the natures of the characters were emerging more and more. The discoveries that were made each day by the actors and myself made this a challenging directorial project.

## CHAPTER V

### EVALUATION OF THE PRODUCTION

In my production of Eric Overmyer's On the Verge, I wanted to create a world where fantasy and reality would collide, creating a place that would be known as Terra Incognita. This is the world into which the three women explorer/adventurers would enter and travel through for the duration of the play. I envisioned these women as realistic and believable, having entered Terra Incognita from the "real" world in the year eighteen eighty-eight. I wanted to see three individual characters whose personalities contrasted, but who could share strong human values.

In evaluating the success of the production from the standpoint of fulfilling my directorial concept it was successful. The design elements supported my concept of a world that was a mixture of fantasy and reality, and the actors were successful in creating the types of characters that I had envisioned.

The actors who played the characters in On the Verge were Sara Edlin-Marlowe, Karen Howell Crane, Cheryl Ann Kersten, and Jeff D. Myhre. The success of the women

characters was due, in part, to their research into the lives of the women that we believed their characters were based upon and, in part, to their own personal empathy with their characters.

Sara Edlin-Marlowe could empathize with the character of Mary. Sara is a very detailed, analytical person, and like Mary, is the oldest of the three women: sincere and encouraging, but also like Mary, she possesses a subtle, sarcastic sense of humor.

The character Alexandra needed to be a contrast between the analytical Mary and the proper and somewhat stuffy Fanny. Karen Crane was able to use her own quick wit and physical energy to create an Alexandra who needed to exude these qualities. Karen's portrayal of Alexandra worked well in developing a good contrast between her character and the other two women's characters.

I wanted Fanny to be the most proper lady of the three women, coming the closest to what the dictionary would define as "feminine." Cheryl Kersten possessed the qualities I was looking for and was able to create a Fanny who was both irritating and lovable.

Jeff Myhre was a good choice to play a variety of characters known as "Mr. Coffee, et al.," for two reasons. First, Jeff is a versatile actor and second, he has a gift for imitation, not only physical, but also vocal. He had many occasions to put his talents to use during our

production. He used a German accent as the Native from Alsace-Lorraine. As Mr. Coffee, he applied a James Mason quality. As the Troll, he used a tough New York street character with appropriate accent, and as Madame Nhu, he produced a high, oriental female voice in a strange woman's facade. Jeff's two most successful characters were Gus, the naive, young gas attendant from "Woody's Esso," and Nicky Paradise, the lounge singer from "Nicky's Peligrosa Bar and Grill."

As Gus, Jeff was the picture of innocence and youthful gullibility. He captured the quality necessary to charm even the proper Fanny into trusting him completely. Jeff portrayed Nicky Paradise as a different sort of charmer who was far from innocent. Jeff's Nicky was like a cliché of an overbearing lounge singer who found himself as exciting and attractive as did the ladies.

The focus of this study was on feminine values. In a critique written by Dr. David Marshall of the UND English Department, he addressed this question after viewing the production. Can a value be perceived as either masculine or feminine?

For values can be merely human; is courage a feminine or masculine value? Is persistence masculine or feminine? Obviously not! The real question then becomes whether there is anything that one might refer to as manly values versus

feminine values. The answer is again probably not! Are values of a higher degree in the hierarchy used for defining the words masculine and feminine? Probably, for there are few masculine or feminine values per se; however, there are roles that societies require of men and women, and these roles change over time and culture, being relative to the particular society and culture in question. These roles that cultures require usually of men and women might have values attached, but the value is in the role and not in the feminine or masculine per se.

Dr. Marshall's critique, which is included in Appendix A, supports the focus I placed on the values of the women characters in the production. However, in hindsight, I realize that the values of the male characters were also pertinent to this study. Dr. Marshall's critique addresses this issue, specifically the values of Mr. Coffee, et al.

Is not the masculine found in Mr. Coffee's sensitivity for human feelings (he does attempt to break the news to Fanny as easily as possible) really a feminine value? Is Mr. Coffee more sensitive to her feelings than Fanny is to her first husband's? Is he therefore more feminine? I don't believe so, for sensitivity



to otherness is a value that comes with personhood whether male or female.

In looking back to the scenes with Nicky Paradise, it is clear that Nicky shared many of the values that were important to the lady travelers. Nicky valued vanity, wit, and humor, a sense of romance, and accepted the differences in the women, granting each of them their individual requests. There was nothing "feminine" [as the dictionary describes feminine] about Nicky and yet this "manly" man's values coincided well with Fanny's, the most "feminine" of the three women.

Does a value become feminine if it is a woman's value and/or masculine if it is a man's value? For the purposes of this study, value was described as: anything of worth, merit, or importance. Feminine was described as: characteristic of women: delicate, sensitive, having no manly characteristics. Manly was described as: acting as a man "should be," i.e., strong, frank, brave, noble, independent, honorable, behaviors that are suitable for a man, i.e., masculine.

The dictionary did not attach any gender association in its description for the word value, however; the descriptions given for the words feminine and manly imply value in their wording. For example: it is suitable for a man to be frank, brave, noble, etc.; it is how he should act. This behavior would be considered worthy of a man,

of value. A feminine person has the characteristics of a woman, delicate and sensitive, but has no manly characteristics, which implies, to me, that a feminine or female person should not be frank, brave, noble, independent, honorable and strong.

If these highly debatable descriptions were to be taken literally, then the characteristics exhibited by the characters, and the women on whom their characters were based, would have been improper because they were feminine, i.e., female persons. One could also draw the conclusion, based upon the dictionary's descriptions, that the values of a woman should be different than the values of a man.

The fact that the characters were men or women did not make their values feminine or masculine. The roles assigned to the women by reason of birth and society played a part in determining how each woman acted in given situations but although Fanny may have behaved in a feminine manner, her value of courage and strength was not diminished. Nicky Paradise acted very manly, or macho, towards the women, but his value of vanity or sense of romance was as strong as Fanny's. Alexandra accepted each new character encountered in Terra Incognita, quirks and all, because it was in her nature to do so, whereas Mary's nature had a strong thirst for knowledge, so she chose to continue her travels into the future to make new discoveries. She valued her independence and freedom of choice.

Alexandra and Fanny chose to stay in the year nineteen fifty-five. In the critiques written by Dr. Koozin, Dr. Donaldson, and Dr. Marshall, Alex and Fanny's choices were viewed as negative and restrictive, and from a feminist point of view this is probably true. However, Fanny and Alex valued their freedom of choice as much as Mary or Nicky. Their decision to stay where they were reflected their human natures, but did not diminish their value of independence and freedom of choice.

In answer to the question I posed earlier, it is not the gender, but rather the nature of a person that causes her or him to choose his or her values. One cannot focus on "feminine values" or "masculine values" because a value has no gender. Vanity may be of great value to a woman, but may be of greater value to some men. Sensitivity and delicacy are valuable qualities for a prima ballerina, but they are also of great value to a male brain surgeon.

Persons of differing natures can value the same things but act on their values differently. I refer again to the last act of the play where Mary chooses to continue her travels into the future and Fanny and Alexandra choose to stay in the year nineteen fifty-five to pursue their dreams. In deciding that one choice is better than another, we are making a "value" judgment, yet how can one decide what is of worth, merit, or importance for another person. Is not equality the equal "value" of difference?

### Conclusions

In drawing my conclusions it is important to assess both the positive and negative aspects of the production and its process.

On the Verge was one of three shows being produced for the 1990 Burtneess Summer Theatre season. I cast my production in May and put it up in June. We rehearsed five days a week for five hours a day. Some of my actors were involved in another show which was being rehearsed in the evenings. As a result these actors had more than the usual physical and mental strain that accompanies any major production.

The attendance for the performance was small. I believe this was due, in part, to unfamiliarity of the play and playwright and the time of year that it was performed. I also believe that the production would be most effective for an audience who were experienced theatre-goers. Many audience members appreciated the clever use of language and subtle humor that Overmyer had written into his play.

On the positive side, I had the opportunity to work with well-trained designers and technicians who were able to create sets, lighting/sound, costumes, and special effects necessary for the show to work. I also had the opportunity to direct a show on the main stage of Burtneess with a cast of seasoned actors. I was given

helpful comments by my advisor and chairperson during the rehearsal process and was able to make good use of my assistant director.

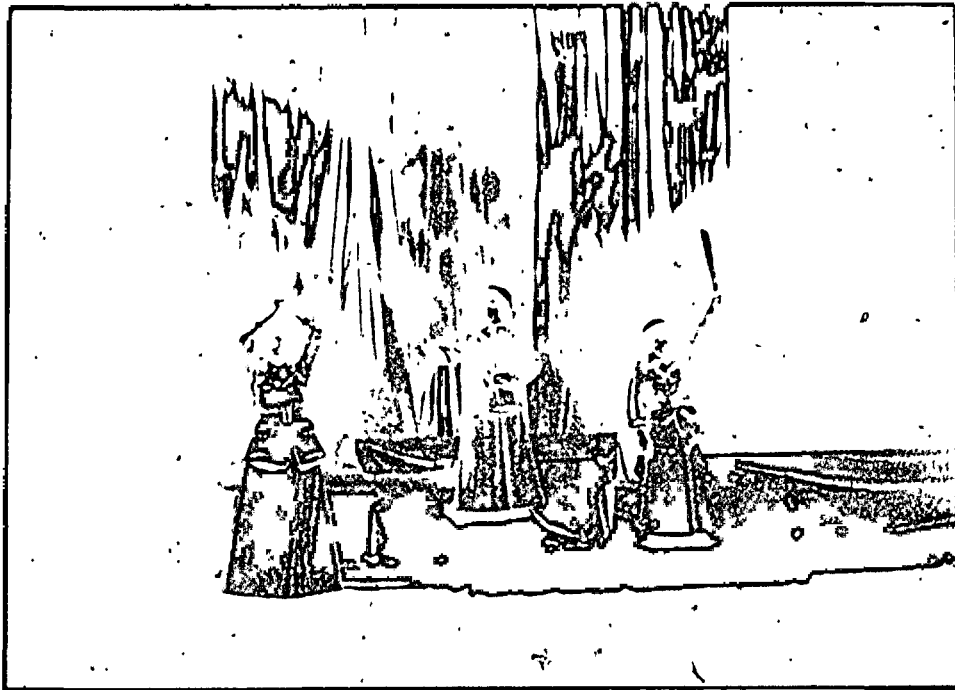
On the Verge was a challenging directorial experience for me. The language, the setting, and the characters were unlike any that could be found in plays that I have directed in the past. Overmyer's heroines provided the material needed for the focus of this study, but those extraordinary Victorian trekkers could be called anything but the "Weaker Sex." This play was limitless in its possibilities for creativity and imagination and as its director, it required me to stretch my imagination and creative abilities. In conclusion, I will quote Mary as she is looking toward the future. "What next? I have no idea. Many mysteries to come. I am on the verge."

4

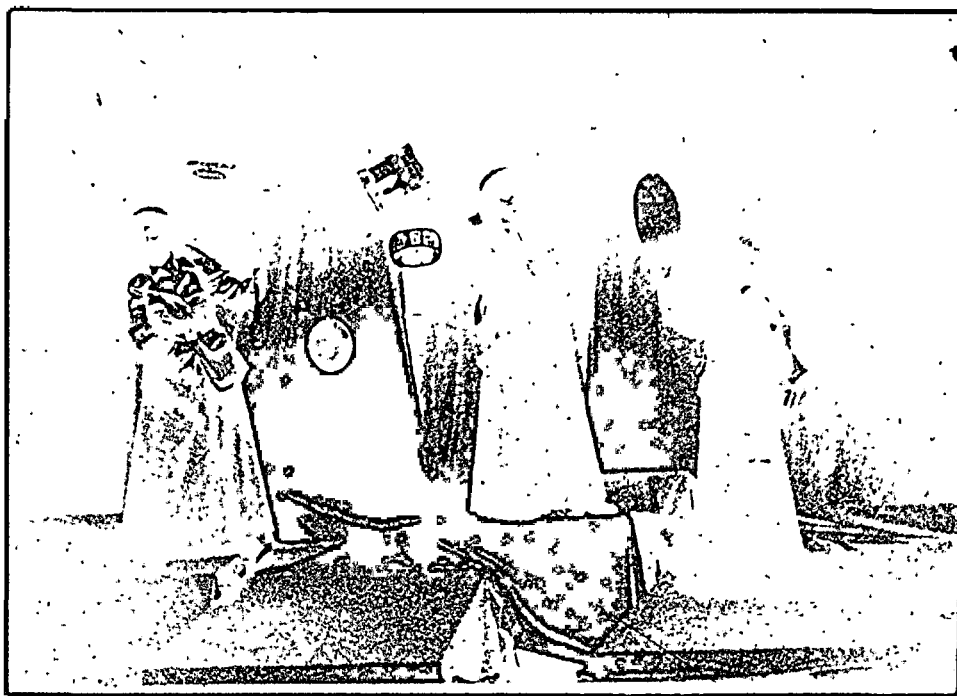
## APPENDICES

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APPENDIX A  
PRODUCTION MATERIAL



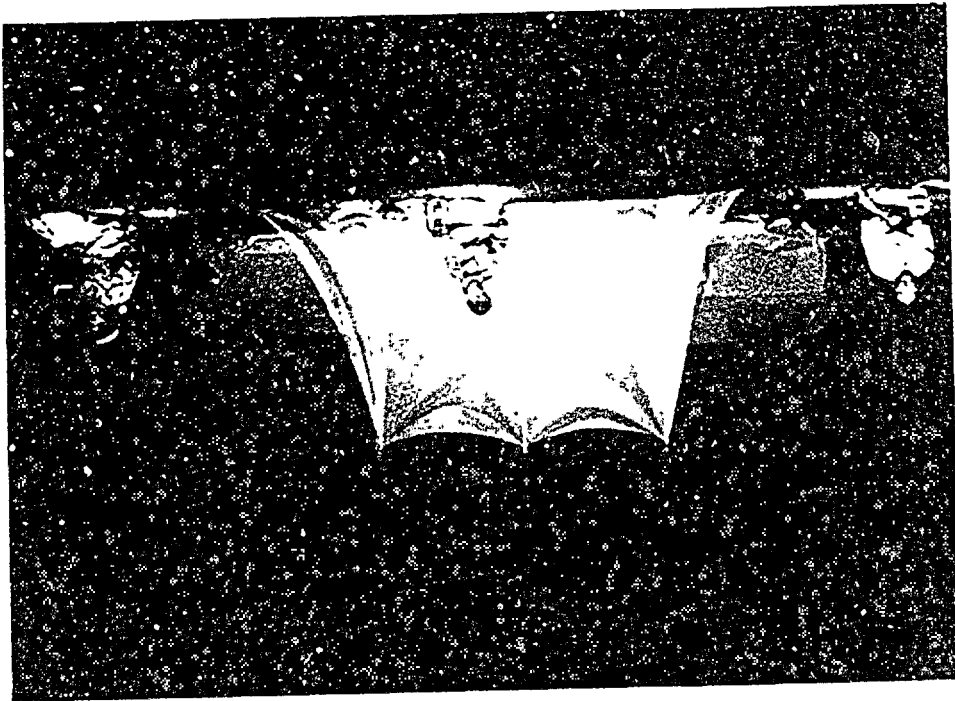
Up and Over



Fanmail from the Future

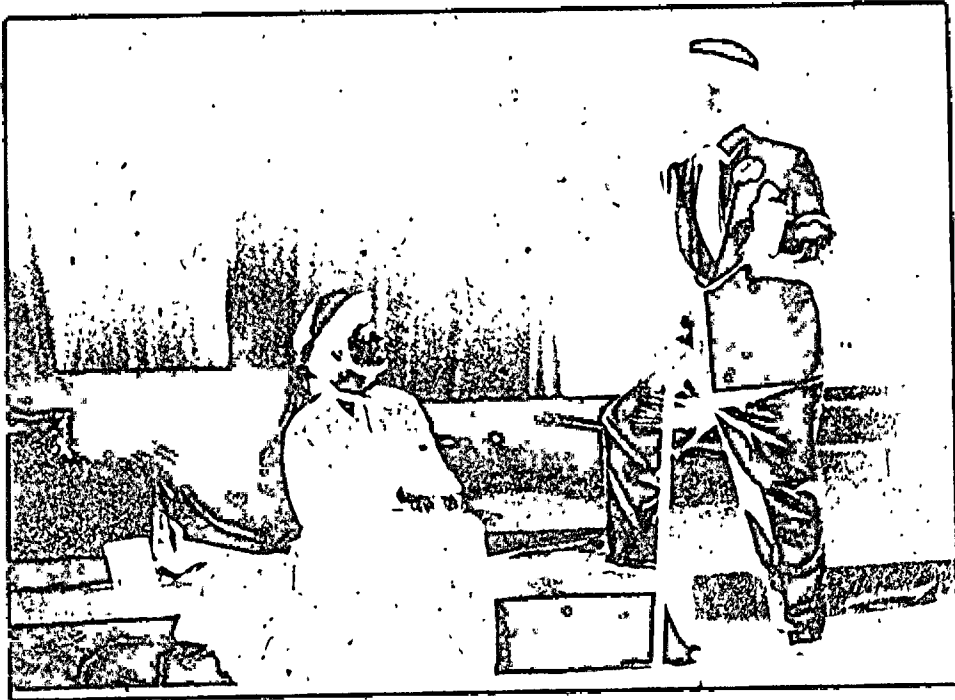


The Starry Deep

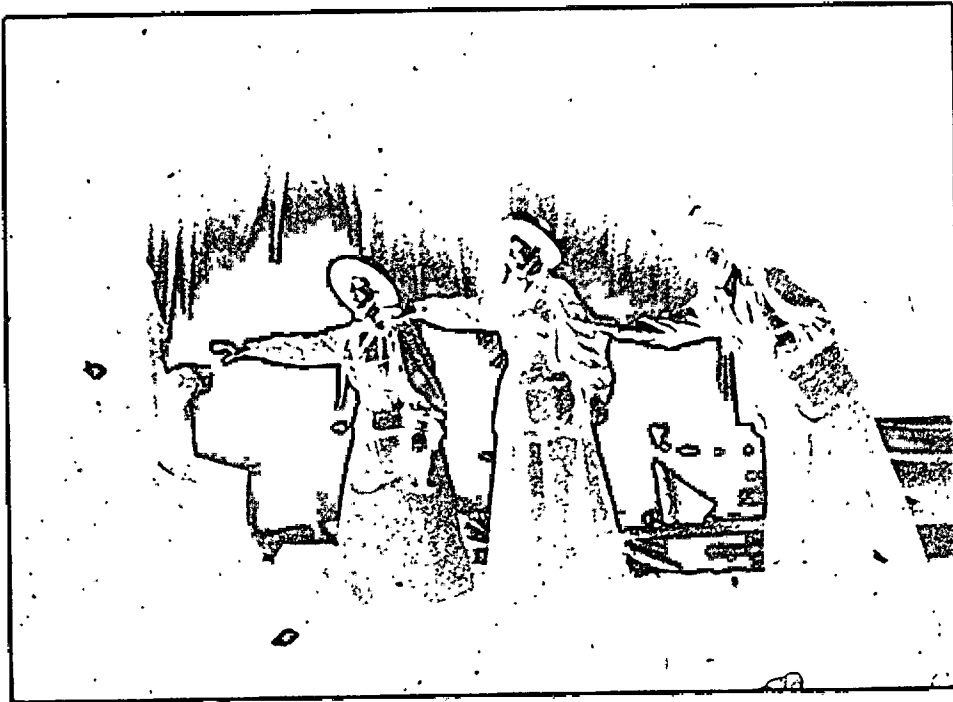


High Tea





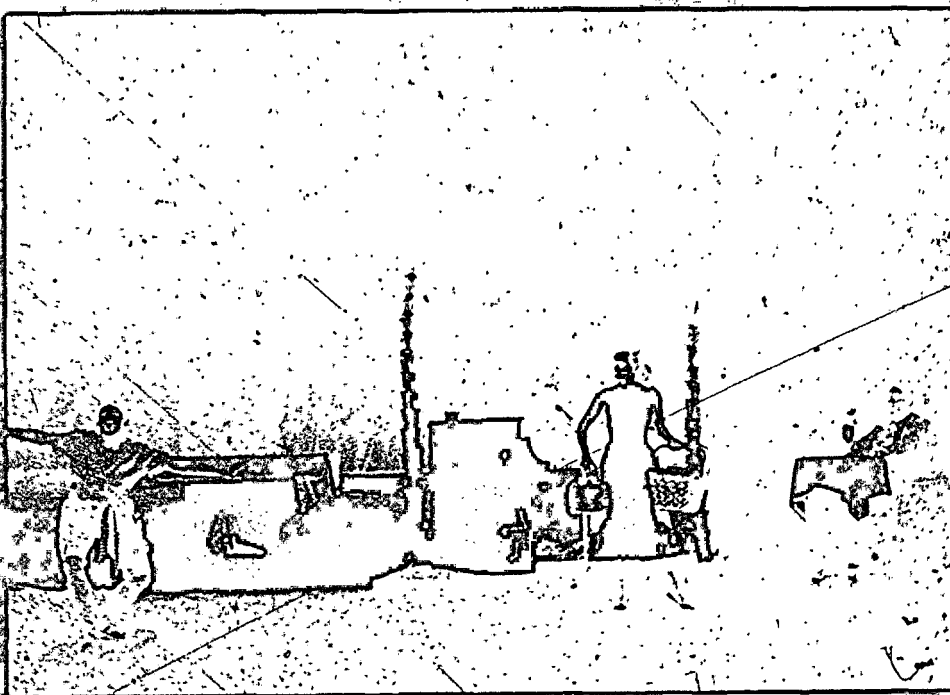
Among the Jesuits



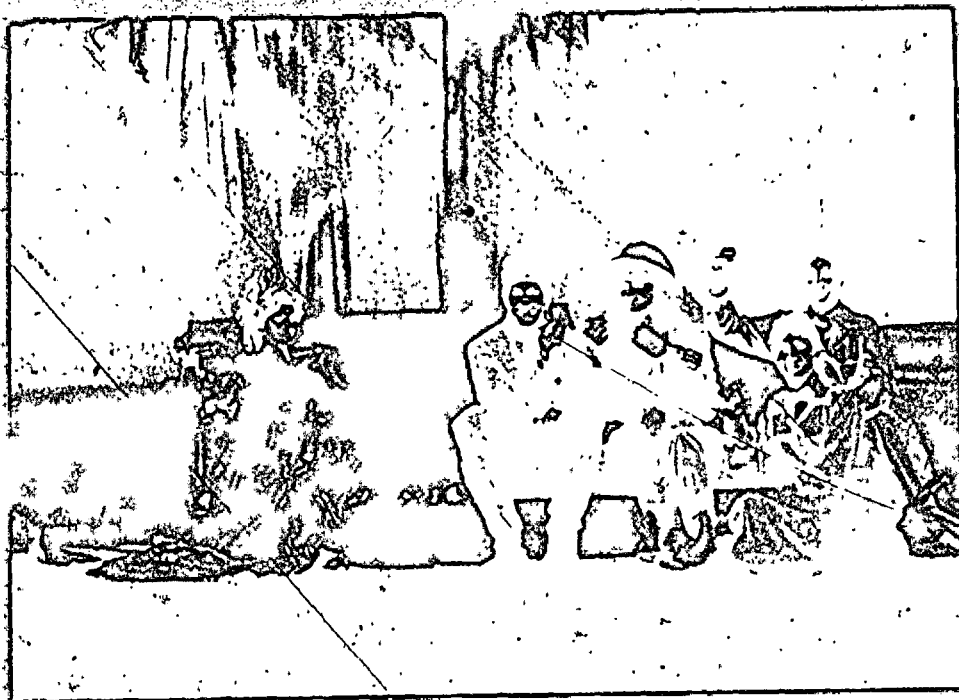
A Prisoner in a Kaleidoscope



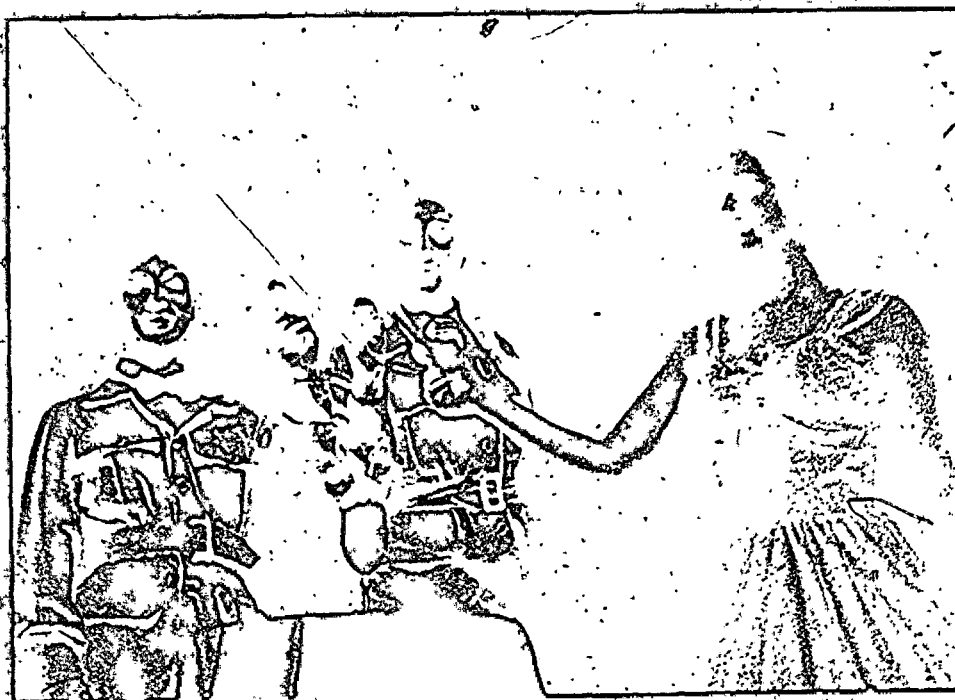
Paradise '65



Rock and Roll Is Here To Stay



On the Verge



Cool Whip

APPENDIX B  
OUTSIDE EVALUATIONS

June 11, 1990 C.E.

Ms. Beth Stadem  
Department of Theatre Arts Box 48  
University of North Dakota  
Grand Forks, N.D. 58202

Dear Ms. Stadem:

The definitions you were interested in are confusing, perhaps because they define via negative (the opposite of one is the other; dead = -alive; alive = -dead; feminine = -masculine, etc.).

However, it does not necessarily follow that a value per se is either of the two, for values can be merely human; is courage a feminine or a masculine value? Is persistence masculine or feminine? Obviously not! The real question then becomes whether there is anything that one might refer to as manly values versus feminine values. The answer is again, probably not! Are values of a higher degree in the hierarchy used for defining than the words masculine or feminine? Probably, for there are few masculine or feminine values per se; however, there are roles that societies require of men and women, and these roles change over time and culture, being relative to the particular society and culture in question. For example, men do not purchase anything in Malagasy culture, and kinship is defined matriarchially in Navajo culture; in Scottish culture until about 1,000 C.E., the throne was matriarchially determined, and Margaret Mead wrote extensively of feminine dominated cultures. These roles that cultures require usually of men and women might have values attached, but the value is in the role and not in feminine or masculine per se.

Eric Overmyer's On the Verge uses the characterizations of three women, Mary, Fanny and Alexandra, but these women are by definition in terra incognita; as long as they are outside of a particular culture or style of roles imposed upon them by that culture, they are sharing human values and not masculine or feminine values. However, once they are "landed" or "osmosised" into 1955, they then take on the values applied to feminine roles in the United States at that time, each to differing degrees.

In Act I, we see the women separate from their cultures and therefore their implied roles. These roles each had rebelled against, in her own fashion (the irony of fashion being underlined with the debate about trousers!). Each separate personality adopts to the leaving of the roles imposed by culture in different ways.

Mary: leadership qualities, the peacemaker, the person who prods the group on to keep "whacking the bush"; she likes to amaze, sometimes even shock, finding joy in rebelling against 19th century Bostonian hypocrisy about implied "feminine values" versus "masculine values"; interested in the similarities of cultures (manioc tastes the same from culture to culture); a person who wants to plough on ahead, seeking new realizations of what her freedom which she has struggled to obtain can mean for her development as a person (who just happens to be female as a result of biological accident); she overcomes obstacles, slashing aside male dominance in her former culture with the machete of logic and very dry wit, making use of the strictures on women in 19th century mindset as valuable not because of their injustice but because of their pragmatic qualities (bilious skirts and pettycoats rescue her from the punjie sticks in the tiger trap); she sees the strictures of the feminine in her former society's demanded roles as useful but not necessary.

Fanny: the most conservative politically of the three and thus also the more bound by 19th century feminine strictures; interested in preserving tradition (possibly because she is the least developed individually of the three, the least mature); she enjoys her freedom and shares Mary's enjoyment of amazing and sometimes shocking, but she does so with yellow journalism, reveling in her rebellion, but sometimes wondering what she has sacrificed, also; she works hard to preserve the civilized structures and strictures, but does so as an attempt to gain power (who is more powerful than she who pours tea?); she conserves the customs of her 19th century past, but the reason why she does is inherent in her personality, for she suffers an approach/avoidance syndrome in her rebellion against society's expectations; her willingness to shock is not as Mary's but more as a personality trait, a need to stand out from the crowd.

Alexandra: a free-spirited, but still young, not developed personality, interested in life and language, willing to make mistakes in order to learn, wanting to see the new and different, wanting to rebel because she sees it as a way to develop herself further; unlike Mary, she goes

exploring in order to witness the new, the different, but also to find herself, which she has not yet done; she is infatuated with the unusual, the unique, willing to defy convention more than the others, not for practicality (as is Mary's case) nor for personal power (as is Fanny's) but for the reason that she is searching for her own self-definition; she is willing to redefine the feminine values that society has placed on her former role, and wears trousers not only because they are practical scaling a cliff but because she finds self-identification through other women's reactions to her "bravado" which they might see as light-hearted "brazenness" or grandstanding; she defines herself in the attempt while Mary does so in the successful completion of the task and Fanny does so by meeting the conventional expectations plus her own needs; Alex's style is to try and try again, regardless of outcome.

In Act II, the journey through terra incognita (the unknown of time and space and geography, but also the freedom from a particular society's restrictions and expectations of role for women) lands the women in a particular society (the United States) at a particular time (1955). The freeing of themselves from the previous society's role expectations (the 19th century's restrictions of women) which we saw in Act I is now opposed by the possible adoption of another society's expectations of feminine roles. Each character reacts to the "temptations" of 1955 in a different way.

Alexandra: becomes a tragic character, for her search for personal identification is abandoned in favor of a search for the new, the different, the exciting--rock 'n roll; with the chance to go on, she doesn't, opting for expected roles of femininity which are different but perhaps more subtly person-destroying, for she doesn't take the opportunity to progress as a person through an infinity of time and cultures, taking instead a new definition of feminine but not knowing whether it is any less restrictive than the former one she had known; her worship of rebelling has "calcified" her into becoming a member of the cult of "what's happening now" and she denies herself true openness by adopting an ersatz openness of "with-it-ism"; her talent for playing with words, which could have, with more journeying through time and cultures, become turned into true lyricism and even great poetry, is instead used only for jingles and other consumptions of "Cool Whip" consumerism; capable of being a great poet with hard work and discipline, she becomes a minor rock 'n roll singer, re-defining her place as behind some hunk on the back of a "hog" Harley; she trades her openness, native curiosity and courage to "whack the bush" for a modern American



definition of the feminist success, which also has just as many restrictions (only more subtle) as those in the 19th century; she trades one rebellion for another.

Fanny: her conservative nature has allowed her to adopt the strictures of the feminine in 1955, not even rebelling as does Alex, and she settles for that role with its supposed more openness as a person, but she denies herself the more openness of infinite time and cultures, of journeying on to true self-development as a total person defined by herself beyond any one culture's role expectations; she sells out for love, settling for "Cool Whip" and ostentatious consumerism and fitting in, but at a price of self-denial of a total personhood; her unease at rebelling against the strictures of 19th century definitions of women now finds more ease with 1955 strictures, but they are still strictures, and she will always wonder what she is missing, but perhaps not really caring that she missed it; she is not tragic like Alex but bathic, finding self-justification in "I-told-you-so-ism," blithely bowling her life away with the deception of padded bras and soon to come face-lifts, "Cool-Whipped" into conformity and not really knowing that it has happened; compared to Alex's tragedy of denying her real selfhood for spur-of-the-moment reveling in rebellion, Fanny sits on hers and lets her courage, inventiveness, inquisitiveness and curiosity diminish and, with them, watching herself diminish as a person to the point where we view her as bathos and not pathos; she becomes just ordinarily uninteresting (which is a damned hard role to pull off on the stage, but it was done, and well done); where Alex at least can grow somewhat within her adopted strictures as a woman in 1955, Fanny cannot, her exploration resulting in commonality and the banal.

Mary: she too is seduced by the culture of 1955, but it is as an observer, an anthropologist, comparing the casino show to a tribal mating ritual (which it is!) and becoming excited by the possibilities of material gain through gambling, but she chooses the ultimate gamble, to strive on in infinite time and place, studying other cultures where the role of the feminine is recast into freer and more creative modes; although she appreciates the "whiz" that results from seeing the enticements of 1955, she intuitively (perhaps even consciously, that difference is where the actor has room to play with the character) realizes that her chance to grow is infinite in terra incognita as long as she slashes out against repression of human soul (female or male) while "whacking the bush," she has the opportunity to make of herself what she will,

regardless of any culture's role strictures and any masculine or even feminine expectations attached to any possible roles; she becomes a redemptive character, standing for the highest and the best (is it any wonder that she has the leadership role of the three and that it is she who arbitrates, and because of these abilities, overcomes the arbitrary, the stifling, in her former culture the masculine domination, in 1955, the ersatz feminine freedom, in the future, anything that might keep her from personhood regardless of sex); she mellows into the future, no longer needing her companions but wishing they had come along for the adventure of it and for themselves; she, forging ahead, has become self-identifying, and she marches on into the future, willing and allowing herself to grow as a person beyond any role definitions.

Each character has curiosity, courage, patience (in varying degrees at different times and episodes); all have, by some semblance of your definitions some masculine qualities as defined by Victorian standards and preserve some feminine qualities as well; however, although Alexandra has these to the most (including a certain immaturity that can be easily discovered as a necessity for playing the masculine role in Victorian or even in our own society) and Fanny has these to the least (opting for outward shows of feminine strictures, i.e., tiara, tea, good grammar), it is Mary that blends best the practicality found in feminine strictures and the bravado supposedly imposed by Victorian masculine strictures, i.e., the white feather, charge of the Light Brigade, etc.) and it is also Mary who through an assimilation of some and a rejection of other strictures on the role of personhood (whether feminine or masculine) who finally finds the necessary courage to be herself and the hell with biology as destiny! The only people who are really interesting are those who become best themselves, regardless of what society says they must or must not do, and that is what Mary is and what she will become, a person who might happen to be a woman (or for someone else, a man). Overmyer explores beyond definitions, and so does the production.

Mr. Coffee, etc.: isn't it interesting that you did not ask us to respond to this character, for does he not have values, whether as a cannibal who has eaten an aviator or as the owner of a 1955 casino who can't sing? If there is a masculine set of values here to be found in Overmyer's text, surely they must also form a constellation around this recurring "everyman" who shows an inability to communicate with Fanny as a defense against her inability to communicate with him (surely he more than one of her magazine readers, yet does she not give them more detail

than she does him?), a jack-of-all-male-values who forms the polarity, or does he? Is not the masculine found in Mr. Coffee's sensitivity for human feelings (he does attempt to break the news to Fanny as easily as possible) really a feminine value? Is Mr. Coffee more sensitive to her feelings than Fanny is to her first husband's? Is he therefore more feminine? I don't believe so, for sensitivity to otherness is a value that comes with personhood, whether male or female. In comparing Fanny's two husbands, can we doubt that the first is more interested in her personhood than the second? While Alexandra opts for the Stallone/Brando "hog-hunkering" biker (God help us if that's what we use to define the masculine!) and thus renounces on her own potential becoming a tragic figure, Fanny sells out to polyester and Las Vegas glitz, a Barry Manilow with his organ (which organ did she ultimately choose?) and casino and endless consumerism, bowling on Fridays and two point three kids and "My God, little Johnny just has to hit a homerun for the Little League and get into Stanford or I'll just die!" Fanny sells out her personhood, Alex stifles her opportunity to become a person, and Mary seeks hers regardless of time or culture or definition or biology. Fanny uses her body, Alex uses her talents (but not well!), but Mary uses her mind, and minds are not masculine or feminine but something beyond--personhood. Isn't it interesting that the Mr. Coffee character (in all of his many manifestations) does not react one-on-one with Mary as he does with Fanny and to a lesser extent Alex? When faced with the worst manifestation (the toll bridge), Mary pays the price and keeps the group moving, for she knows the more important fact, that it is not the destination or the illusive IKE (or the need for a man!) or even the fulfilling of supposed needs (a career for Alex; a home life for Fanny) that makes life worth the effort; it is the journey, not the destination; it is doing the best with what we have to be the best type of human being we can be regardless of society-demanded roles or status (a whole area left out of this critique!) or even sex. It is the singer, not the song! Overmyer's song motivates us to be better singers (Alex, that's your line!) and better women if we're women and better men if we're men, but most of all, better human beings, for the journey is not sexual but spiritual, and sexual identification can trap us too (Fanny, that's your line!) and only if we don't let it are we able to enjoy the pilgrimage (Mary, that's yours!).

Oh well, hope this helps more than it confuses. It is an excellent production, one which each person involved in

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it can be very proud of. My thanks for letting me do this, for it was fulfilling and fun!

Sincerely,

Dave Marshall

Report on "On the Verge," feminine values (attended 20 June production)

Sandra Donaldson, English, Box 170

I. Values demonstrated during first act:

Mary--prefers to travel alone, takes pride in being an anthropologist and insists on bringing back physical evidence, wishes to be mentioned by Boston Geo. Seems to enjoy her strength and is very decisive. The only feminine value she demonstrated very emphatically was her belief in modesty; that is, she opposed Alexandra's wish that they wear trousers, saying that riding side-saddle was best. She directed them all to powder their noses after a particularly harrowing adventure.

Fanny--she valued the attention given to her at the Explorers' Club and enjoyed thrilling others with her stories (about what they ate, where she went, who she met, and in what circumstances). She too didn't like the idea of trousers (she contributed horror at the thought of riding a bicycle, didn't she?) and so must also value modesty. She valued her husband--wrote to him regularly, though with publication in mind also. So that is somewhat feminine. She valued the Masai body (not at all a feminine, but certainly female response).

Alex--She valued language, her surroundings, other people. She seemed the most adventurous and least stereotypically feminine. She would have been called a feminist, and I'm surprised that word never came up either in the play or the description of it. She was very candid, not a feminine characteristic either.

What struck me right off was their saying that an inheritance, money and time, are what allowed them to travel and do what they wished--this is straight out of Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own, p. 110: "allowing a generous margin for symbolism, that five hundred a year stands for the power to contemplate, that a lock on the door means the power to think for oneself." This money came from a legacy her aunt left her (pp. 37-38) and meant she didn't ever have to work at menial jobs or depend on flattering a man for food and shelter.

There didn't seem to be much that was feminine about these women, then, except two of them thought

trousers were immodest, they powdered their noses, and one of them thought about her man a lot.

## II. Values demonstrated during the second act:

Mary--she continued to value her work as an anthropologist, which is not at all feminine. She valued money at Nicky's, and saw herself as voluptuous, again not feminine.

Fanny--she was most interested in a bath and the post office; so if cleanliness and orderliness are feminine then she is. She certainly demonstrated stereotypical femininity in regularly falling for the various Oscars who appeared (Nicky, ultimately) and seemed to value marriage, though nothing was said about children, which seems to be the quintessential feminine value (though the dictionary definitions strangely don't reflect that characteristic). She valued accepting what is and wished to elude the future. She valued feminine clothing (dance dresses and go go boots, a crown). She valued getting an engagement ring.

Alex--she valued the possibilities for having a career, a way to apply her love for words. She valued riding astride--the troll's motorcycle paralleling her enthusiasm for trousers and the freedom they give for riding a cycle of any sort. What feminine values she demonstrated seemed few--staying with a man who could help her in her career, maybe, but that isn't feminine in the way it's defined in the abstract (it's co-dependent and a strange outcome, I thought, for this seemingly progressive woman).

If dictionary definitions are important to this work, you should probably look up the word feminist in the multi-volume Oxford English Dictionary at the library, because it was in use during the 19th century and certainly describes Mary and Alex, though not Fanny. If however, connotation is more important than denotation (that is, to many people today "feminine" is an insult, whereas in the 50s it was a compliment), it would be useful to look at some of the good research done by anthropologists\* and psychologists on genders. Literary philosophers, too,

\*for example, Sherry Ortner's "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" in Woman, Culture, and Society, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, Stanford Univ. Press, 1974.

are doing work applicable to the question of how personality is constructed by society--that is, we are formed in many subtle ways to behave in ways appropriate to our biologically-assigned sex category. Most commentators on male and female roles say today that society constructs the female (or male)--that we choose from a limited selection but think that because we choose we are freely making those choices.

I don't know what to make of the play. The least admirable character could probably be described as the only feminine one, Fanny--other-directed though rebellious briefly, but very susceptible to material seductions (a Jacuzzi, a lounge lizard's charms) and wanting a conventional role (as the fiancée). One wonders what she'll do when the conversation turns to motherhood. Perhaps the oddest outcome was Alex's choosing to stay in '55 and with a guy--geez! she seemed the most open to change, one who embraced the new and enjoyed whatever was around her, yet she was going to get off the bus and stay in an era that is famous for producing the bored and unhappy "housewife" about whom Betty Friedan wrote The Feminine Mystique.

It had some great shots at various versions of American culture (50s or 70s) but all the culture symbols were male (Ike, Nixon, Herzog), except for the egg beaters which all the women obtained somewhere along the line--a symbol of women's domestic role. Is that it?--did Fanny pick up the first egg beater and get cursed by it? (Mary not getting hers until the end).

"An Analysis of Feminine Values in a Production of Eric Overmyer's On the Verge"

Master of Arts thesis by Beth Stadem

Comments regarding feminine qualities and values which the production evokes:

Before I discuss my response to On the Verge, I need to make one picky suggestion about the matrix of definitions which have been chosen for examination of the play. First of all, Oxford English Dictionary definitions are the generally accepted source for scholarly writing and ought to be stated as such in your text. Secondly, if you are looking for opposition in adjectives used to describe the difference between men and women, you need to compare feminine and masculine or manly and womanly rather than feminine and manly. I think they have slightly different connotations which could lead to problems if you use these definitions in an analysis.

Now, as to your thesis questions. I believe the three female characters in On the Verge exude persona qualities that are both feminine and masculine, although the strict use of dictionary synonyms may not support this dichotomy. One would need to go further to define what it is to be "delicate, tender," and "sensitive." In any case, having tea time and taking time for powdering noses in the middle of the jungle may be construed as delicate. Their attention to dress and cleanliness and their discussions of clothing may also be seen as particularly feminine. They do, however, demonstrate characteristics of masculine strength in their bushwhacking and mountain climbing; bravery as they challenge the mysteries of the future which are thrust at them, and independence as they uniquely react to the world of 1955.

Alexandra, Fanny and Mary mutually value exploration of the unknown, at least in Act I. In their 19th-century world Overmyer presents the characters with adventureome natures which would have set them apart from the distaff society of their day. In Act II where the trio is confronted with the choices of modern life in 1955 America they seem to shed their spirit for searching the unknown just as they lose their sense of language. Rather than investigating and documenting their thoughts with a density of language, jingles and phrase slang offer shallow summaries of their new-found existence. Overmyer suggests, especially with Alexandra and Fanny, that modern woman has lost her masculinity--her strength, bravery and



independence. Mary alone, who does not succumb to the weak pleasures of modern life, continues to see into the future--the future beyond 1955--thus upholds her value for adventure which her two companions in travel appear to have lost.

Mary goes off independently with her lust for knowledge. She embraces the future not merely accepts it. As an anthropologist she applies her methodology to her "fossils of the future" and holds great "nostalgia for the future." Alexandra and Fanny, on the other hand, alter their values for those of the modern society which they encounter, choosing bowling, jacuzzis and motorcycles over time travel.

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